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A Familiar House

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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Virginia Commonwealth University  
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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
List of Figures	iv
The Woods	1
Andy	6
The Desert	8
Concrete	9
St. Teresa of Avilla	11
A Familiar House	14
Appendices	19
Documentation	20
Influences	26
Film	26
Literature	28
Painting	29
Land Art & Installation	32
Bibliography	35
Vita	36

## List of Figures

Figure 1: A Familiar House	20
Figure 2: A Familiar House / Cathedral Windows	21
Figure 3: A Familiar House / Poetry Pews	22
Figure 4: A Familiar House / Landscape Bench	23
Figure 5: A Familiar House	24
Figure 6: A Familiar House	26
Figure 7: Stagecoach. John Ford	27
Figure 8: Dead Man. Jim Jarmusch	27
Figure 9: Winter. Andrew Wyeth	30
Figure 10: Church and Horse. Alex Colville	31
Figure 11: East-West/West-East. Richard Serra	33
Figure 12: Every Which Way. Richard Serra	33
Figure 13: The City. Michael Heizer	34

## Abstract

The landscapes of my home in Connecticut are important to me. When I was young, I went to the woods for seclusion and comfort. While I wandered through the woods, I discovered a passion for storytelling. Now that I no longer live in New England, I miss the familiar landscapes of home. As a way to portray my sentiment, I write poetic narratives and create objects to illustrate natural landscapes.

I combine my interests of classic Americana art and literature with brutalist architecture and modern furniture to create immersive installations. I work with concrete and hardwood to materially bridge the unnatural with the natural.

*A Familiar House* is an installation consisting of a concrete jail cell, cathedral windows made of denim and a poetry chapbook. This work stems from my incarcerated brother's longing to be home. I depict my brother's prison in the American West through concrete walls and portray our New England home with poetry. *A Familiar House* represents the desire for the familiar while confined in an isolated landscape.

## The Woods

Under an oak tree, I sat on a mossy boulder and read stories about cowboys. I stopped to watch my dog run between the trees, chasing deer. His white coat against the woods, he was my phantom dog. He stopped by a brook to drink from the auburn water. As I walked over, he looked up and took off into the woods, pursuing the chase. I sat near the edge and with one hand felt the water. It was cold and warm at the same time.

Alone with my dog, there was no voice but my own.

I create work to foster my sentiment for the woods and to honor the lessons I learned while wandering. My time in the wood revealed the importance of having a space for myself, where I can be alone and think with a clear mind.

In our childhood house,  
voices sing about the nights  
when we ran between the trees,  
chasing after a phantom dog,  
lost in the pursuit of deer.

In the woods, there were no familial conflicts. I had a space to myself. I felt at ease.

I grew up with a single mother, an absent and alcoholic father, and a drug addict for an older brother. All the while, I struggled to come to terms with my identity as a gay man.

In the woods, there was no strife.

I raised my voice to my father one night.  
He looked at me and rose from his chair. He walked to the  
front door and left.  
That night, he stood out in the cold with no shoes.  
The next morning he blamed me for his frostbite.



My dad and I share an appreciation for the woods. He goes to hunt, while I go to walk.

My dad bonded with his father through hunting, while I have no interest in such an act. He is disappointed by my disdain for hunting and I feel guilty, but I am unwilling to kill.

My dad and I have many similarities; yet differ in our philosophy. We're both makers. He is a carpenter and I am a sculptor. We use our hands for a living and value beautiful objects, but we lack sincerity. Our relationship has grown through the sharing of our skills, but I still feel distant with my dad. He was never there for me as a father when I was young. Although we love each other, it's difficult to be close to someone who was never emotionally there for you. I know he cares, but he doesn't know how to communicate, so I write to remind myself to love my father.

My dad hunts in the woods.

He asked us to go with him. And,  
Andy listened well.

But, I could never kill.

A father's shame and a son's guilt are no remedy  
for splitting bones.

Nothing looks the same, but I still like the woods.

I stumble past trees, forgetting what's gone,  
the land between or concrete walls.

I try to remember while the woods keep me far.

The woods are important to me, but I am also afraid of this space.

Once, when I was young, I went exploring in the woods behind our old house. I stood at the edge of the woods and saw a mountain lion in the distance, climbing the side of a rocky crag. We made eye contact and I never felt so terrified. Mountain lions are incredibly rare in Connecticut. It is unlikely that I will see another in my hometown, but every time I venture into the woodlands, there is an irrational fear of mountain lions inside my chest, beating ferociously. I overlook this fear and venture onwards.

I stayed out in the woods far too long.  
I never knew fear until you weren't here.

You said they kept to mountaintops,  
but I swear, I'm staring one down.

I'm still a boy, who's afraid of mountain lions  
and I wish my older brother was home.

Andy

*A Familiar House* is for my incarcerated brother, Andrew. I feel guilty that I am so privileged while he has nothing. I miss my older brother and want to share his story. Andrew's experience is valid and offers an intimate perspective on imprisonment.

At one point, Andrew was put in solitary confinement for nine months, with little access to other people and the outside landscape. I am concerned for my brother's readjustment into society after experiencing such restricted environment.

Andy lost it all behind concrete walls.  
With hands stuck under sand, he  
wishes for a window  
to count clouds.

Although Andrew and I are half siblings, we love each other just as much as any brothers.

Growing up, Andrew and I were opposites in every way. He was an athletic extrovert and I was an artistic introvert, but we managed to stay close even with our differences.

In the pasture behind our house  
I found you dancing with closed eyes.  
As I walked over, you fell into the grass. I told you to stand,  
but you declined and rolled to your side.  
You asked me to sit, and I did, even though  
the grass was wet.

Andrew distanced himself from our family with his drug addiction. He tried to stay clean, but his constant relapses were taxing on the family. He took everything from my mom and I, leaving us with nothing. He abused our sympathy and stole all of our possessions for drug money. At his lowest point in his addiction, I thought it would be best if he died.

Twelve years ago, Andrew moved to live with his biological father in Hawaii as a way to overcome his addiction. He stopped using and held a stable job until he witnessed the murder of his father. This violent act threw him back into drug abuse. He was arrested and transferred to a jail in Arizona. We haven't seen each other in eight years and when I speak with him, he tells me how much he misses our home.

Andy writes  
to say concrete walls are cold even in the desert.  
He can't remember the color of wood and  
wants to see more than sand.  
I try to remind him of home.

## The Desert

I use landscapes as platforms for self-reflection and personal narrative.

The way the horizon line divides ground and sky is like a monument. It is a testament to the beauty of the natural world. My goal as an artist is to accomplish such a feat of awe. It may be impossible to compete with nature, but I'll keep trying.

As a New Englander, with no experiential knowledge of the American West, I see western landscapes as monumental and mythical. Whether it is through literature or western films, I admire this landscape, even though I've never been out west. I set my narrative in this landscape as a way to show my appreciation for the land.

Andrew doesn't know much about the landscapes of the American West. He only sees a cropped image through prison windows and recreational time outside. Andrew and I share a limited view of the American West. His access to the land is literally restricted by prison and my interaction is restricted by location.

Andy to Willy,

I thought you would find me in the desert.  
There are mountains of sand on top of mountains.  
Sometimes, the peaks are covered white.

I've never seen snow in the desert.  
It's not the same as it is in the woods.  
Nothing is the same here, but I don't mind.

## Concrete

Concrete is beautiful. It's cold, clean and heavy. It's labor intensive to pour, but once it's setting, all I have to do is wait, and then lift and move hundreds of pounds. Mixing is like a performance, but just for myself. I'm alone, constantly moving, lifting bags of cement, pouring water, mixing a thousand pounds, and battling time. My sweat drips in and becomes part of the piece. I am proud, but also exhausted. I question why I constantly use such a material, but I am stubborn and love concrete.

I romanticize concrete, but if I didn't enjoy the material, why would I put myself through this intense process?

I cut off my tongue  
and cast it in a block of concrete.  
By the ocean,  
I throw it under waves.  
Soon, it will become sand.

Concrete is naturally derived from sand, silica, and limestone but is primarily used to build manmade structures. I work within the dichotomy of artificial versus natural and strive to blur the lines between the two.

Concrete is minimal and brutal. It's architectural and sculptural. It is the material used for government buildings, such as hospitals and prisons. Concrete is the bedrock for most homes and public structures. The material coincides perfectly with *A Familiar House*.



## St. Teresa of Avilla

The pews are always too small for my knees, but church is not meant to be comfortable.

Growing up Catholic, but no longer practicing, there's a lingering guilt inside my consciousness.

Faith is important to my mom and I feel pressure to rediscover my relationship with God. I do not want to disappoint her, but I have no interest at this point in my life. She has done everything for our family and I want to make her proud.

My brother told our mom he doesn't believe in God.  
He and I sat in silence as she threw all the flowers we picked  
for her out the window.  
Her fury made me want him to apologize, but  
his stubbornness is just as great as a mother's rage.  
I wonder what our dad will say when my brother tells him  
he has no God.

I attended St. Teresa of Avilla, a small church set in my pastoral hometown. Many of the parishioners went to Sunday mass dressed in flannel and denim. As a way to represent my rural home in context with my religious upbringing, I built church windowpanes out of denim.

Behind the altar, I count windowpanes to stay awake.  
Each sentence from the priest was like a curse,  
putting my eyes to sleep.

My mom would be ashamed if she knew I stopped listening,  
but it's hard to pay attention with all those lines.

I stared at the stained glass crucifixion and wondered if  
counting was sacrilegious. But this was the  
Body of Christ, it's meant to be seen,  
and counted, so I count.

Andrew and I share a similar perspective on our Catholic upbringing, but recently he turned to faith as an escape and a process of healing while incarcerated. To depict our relationship with religion, I created the godlike figure, The Summoner of Sand. The Summoner of Sand is a metaphor for waiting in an unfamiliar landscape, portrayed by the counting of sand and the passing of time. The Summoner is an ominous figure that haunts Andy, coaxing him to collect and count piles of desert sand.

Words drip in shades of sand.  
His tongue breaks from dry heat.

Like a god, I call Him the Summoner of Sand.  
He eats the black and white in my eyes so  
I see in grey.

If I count every night,  
He'll let me know how much longer I have to wait.

Listen to Him and He'll bring you to me.  
He only asks for the counting of sand.

## A Familiar House

*A Familiar House* depicts Andrew's longing to be home. I portray my brother's prison in the American West through a constructed jail cell and the landscapes of our home in New England with poetry. The grey denim windowpanes illustrate our religious upbringing and varying connection to faith. The poetry shelves are a reference to the pews in St. Teresa of Avilla.

This work represents Andrew's desire for the familiar while confined in an isolated landscape.

Ride with me to a familiar house.  
I want to walk through halls,  
and stand in our old bedroom.

The shadows stayed the same, but  
I don't know if you see them as I do.

Turn around and tell me it feels good to be home,  
even if it doesn't. And I'll say the same to you.

## *A Familiar House*

The space between the bolted concrete walls portrays the distance between two landscapes. The undulating surfaces of the inner walls create visual tension. These concrete landscapes are close to one another; they are connected, but never touching, familiar but distant. The outer surfaces resemble institutionalized structures, a reference to the cold exterior and interior of prison.

The walls come together to create a cell, but the structure is also a reference to church. The windowpanes are arched like a gothic cathedral. The denim is a personal gesture to the rural parish of St. Teresa of Avilla. The soft fabric is in contrast with the concrete. The denim transitions in color from dark to light, referencing my family's connection to Catholicism. I use shades of grey for tonal consistency.

The window frames and poetry bookshelves are made of oak, the same wood used in St. Teresa of Avilla. The oak is ebonized black. The chapbook shelves are designed after church pews. The poetry references home and family. The narrative tethers prison, church, and home together.

The metal brackets act prison cell bars. The heavy, black steel adds visual weight to the work. The bars constrict and limit one's access to the interior space of the cell. The hardware reads as industrial and cold, coinciding with the smooth surface of the concrete.

The walls contain a bench, a body, and a landscape. I combine concrete and sand to depict an American West landscape. The concrete and sand landscape is contained behind walls, denying anyone from entering the space. The golden sand is the one component that offers a tonal shift in color. The concrete bench is placed on top of two ebonized blocks of oak. The bench is raised off the ground, symbolizing a memorial or coffin, a reference to my brother's body in prison.

Behind four walls with no window, sit on a concrete bench  
and count time by the passing of sand.  
When there are no grains left, stand with both eyes open.  
Remember the order of walls and try to climb the ceiling.

*A Familiar House* facilitates a personal relationship with the incarcerated for those who do not have a connection to the perspective of inmates in prison. In the current political climate, with so many families broken apart by a harsh and unsympathetic penal system, my work stands as a representation of the desire to feel a connection with loved ones. *A Familiar House* validates Andrew's longing to be with his family, and critiques the system that divided us.

Sitting between boulders half covered in moss,  
I forget how concrete feels.

My dog runs between trees, chasing deer tracks.  
White coat against the woods,  
he's a phantom dog.

This is better than the desert,  
I never want to be a cowboy again.







Figure 1. *A Familiar House*



Figure 2. *A Familiar House / Cathedral Window*



Figure 3. *A Familiar House / Poetry Pews*



Figure 4. *A Familiar House / Landscape Bench*





Figure 5. *A Familiar House*



Figure 6. *A Familiar House*

### Film

I watched countless western films, ranging from classics to modern renditions. Some of the most impactful are *Stagecoach* (1939), *Red River* (1948), *High Noon* (1952), *Dead Man* (1996), *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007) and *True Grit* (2010).

Western films vary from campy to somber and historically accurate to downright racist. One aspect that remains constant in most westerns is how the landscape impacts the narrative. The American West, through its beauty and harshness, challenges our understanding of humankind's relationship to the land. I take this portrayal of a landscape and apply it into my narratives.





Figure 7. John Wayne in *Stagecoach* (1939)



Figure 8. Johnny Depp in the acid western *Dead Man* (1996)

## Literature

I immensely admire Cormac McCarthy's novels, especially *The Crossing*, for their bleak, yet sullenly sincere representation of humankind in nature.

His father stood looking toward the west where the sun had gone and where the wind was rising out of the darkness. The small sands in that waste was all there were for the wind to move and it moved with a constant migratory seething upon itself. As if in its ultimate granulation the world sought some stay against its own eternal wheeling. (McCarthy 112)

Other novels, some not directly related to western landscapes, but still relevant to *A Familiar House* include *Light Boxes* by Shane Jones, *Train Dreams* by Denis Johnson, *O Pioneers!* by Willa Cather, and *Blood Sport* by Robert F. Jones.

## Painting

I consistently refer to the paintings of Andrew Wyeth. Wyeth's formal renditions of interior spaces and figurative works are inspiring, yet it is his landscape paintings that leave me in awe.

Wyeth is the master of depicting subtle moments of somberness. His work creates a grand feeling of loneliness in a place of beauty.

Additional references include Alex Colville, Glenn Dean and Guim Tió Zarraluki.



Figure 9. Andrew Wyeth, *Winter*, 1946



Figure 10. Alex Colville, *Church and Horse*, 1964

The works of Richard Serra, Michael Heizer, Robert Smithson, Andrea Zittel, Pamela Rosenkranz, and Doug Aitken play into the formal qualities of *A Familiar House*.

Monumental and monolithic sculptures have ability to simultaneously stand with and against the natural world. Whether the works incorporate natural components from the land or are placed in a specific landscape, I admire the connection and contrast between natural and manmade.





Figure 11. Richard Serra, *East-West/West-East*, 2014



Richard Serra, *Every Which Way*, 2015



Michael Heizer, *The City*, 1972-



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Jones, Robert. *Blood Sport*. New York: Dell Publishing Co, 1975. Print.

Jones, Shane. *Light Boxes*. New York: Penguin Books, 2010. Print.

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Crossing*. New York: Knopf, 1994. Print.

## Education

**Virginia Commonwealth University**, Richmond, VA.  
Master of Fine Arts, Craft and Material Studies.  
2018

**Rhode Island School of Design**, Providence, RI.  
Bachelor of Fine Arts, Furniture Design.  
Concentration, Literary Arts and Studies/Creative Writing.  
2014

## Exhibitions

MFA Thesis Exhibition, Anderson Gallery. Richmond, VA. 2018  
Nature and Neon, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts. Gatlinburg, TN. 2018  
Nine Days, The Hawthorne Gallery. Richmond, VA. 2017  
Emerge, Page Bond Gallery. Richmond, VA. 2017  
Critical, Homan Design. Richmond, VA. 2017  
Senior Furniture Exhibition, Woods Gerry Gallery. Providence, RI. 2014  
Furniture Triennial Show, Chace Center. Providence, RI. 2014

## Publications

A Familiar House. Chapbook. 2018  
Under The Midnight Sun / I Am Without Horse. Chapbook. 2017  
The Woodlands. Chapbook. 2014  
Crown / King In The Woods. Chapbook. 2013  
Clerestory Journal of the Arts. Poetry and Art Journal. 2013

## Awards and Grants

VCUarts Graduate Student Research Grant. 2018  
VCUarts Graduate Student Travel Grant. 2018  
William B. Clopton Scholarship. 2018

## Professional Experience

**FoundRe**-Chicago, Illinois. 2016  
Furniture maker in small-batch woodshop.

**Chicago Furniture Revival**-Chicago, Illinois. 2014-2015  
Fabricator and renovator at furniture restoration studio.

**Carving Studio and Sculpture Center**-West Rutland, Vermont. 2013  
Intern at artist residency.

## Teaching Experience

**Adjunct Professor**-VCUarts, Crafts and Materials Studies. 2017 Professor for a class of 15 students in a beginning woodworking course. Demonstrated proper use of shop machinery, assisted students with project design and construction, and held critical critiques of work.

**Teaching Assistant**-VCUarts, Crafts and Materials Studies. 2017-2018 Teaching assistant for a beginning woodworking class. Assisted with class management, project design and construction, and critique.

**Craft Demonstrator**-CreatiVets Combat Veteran Intro to the Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University. 2017  
Demonstrated concrete casting and mold making to a group of combat veterans.